



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) submission to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) re: the proposed Literature Study Design.

Authored by: VATE Curriculum Committee

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About the VATE submission

VATE sent its online survey to its approximately 7500 members and asked a range of questions grouped under the following themes: The study of Literature; Areas of Study; The exam. We received 7 responses. Below is the breakdown of sectors and regions:

Catholic	1
Government	4
Independent	2

Region	Number
South-east	4
South-west	1
North-west	2

We reflected on the lower than expected number of responses and believe that the impact of 2020 and the ongoing challenges of COVID-19, compounded by the most recent lockdown in Victoria, meant that teachers did not have adequate space or time to read the proposed design and reflect on the changes. However, the responses that inform this submission were lengthy and fully engaged with the proposed Study Design and the questions posed.

We look forward to continuing to work with the VCAA to support the Literature teaching community across the state with the implementation of the finalised Study Design.



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The study of Literature

Respondents believe the study of Literature in the senior years has value for the following reasons:

- It inculcates a love of literature's capacity to examine the human condition.
- It allows students to encounter significant political, social, historical and philosophical concepts through fictional characters and experiences.
- It requires students to explore various perspectives and experiences of diverse voices.
- It enables students to recognise that texts are open to interpretation. It does so by providing a safe space to share viewpoints and to evolve their thinking through engagement with, and close consideration of, other standpoints.
- It requires students to closely examine how language infers meaning by studying a diverse range of literary texts, and to discuss and write about ideas critically, empathetically and interestingly, supported by textual evidence.
- It allows students to consider the ways that social constructs and conventions can both privilege, and impede and exploit members of a community.
- It allows students to understand the way literature shapes culture and vice versa. Placing emphasis on its role in our current society would help to modernise the study and improve its relevance beyond just selection of contemporary texts.

Respondents expressed the following views about the proposed Study Design's ability to address the skills and knowledges exemplified above:

- The shift of language from 'literary perspectives' to 'multiple viewpoints' assists in allowing students to recognise the ways in which texts address issues of diverse voices. In a country which identifies itself as multicultural, texts such as *Foreign Soil* and *Language for a New Century* have been sound examples of inclusivity through diversity of representation.
- The inclusion of the First Nations component is especially crucial in fostering this sense of inclusivity.
- The time spent on planning and teaching the background knowledge for literary perspectives works against students developing their own interpretations of texts. Too much theory can destroy some students' love of literature.
- The critical perspectives task is a wonderful way to challenge students to reflect on their own ideas and values and delve deeper into the text. However, the allowance for students to quote from reviews and academic texts removes the need for students to develop their own thoughts and ideas.
- Although the SD offers opportunity for both creative and analytical responses, the creative response is mimicry and does not enable students to develop their own writer's voice and style.
- The inclusion of the genre study offers students and teachers the opportunity to engage with texts that can be more responsive to students' needs and interests.



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In responding to the questions of whether the proposed Study Design offered equity for the diversity of student cohorts, and whether it achieves a balance of rigour and opportunities for success for all students, respondents made the following comments:

- The SD still allows for multiple intelligences and skills, both creative and academic.
- In changing the progression of Units 3 and 4 by shifting the 'Creative response to texts' AoS back to Unit 4, there is likely to be greater equity of teaching practice, as it will no longer be advantageous if some schools rush through Unit 3.
- The text list must reflect a desire for equity. Not all students will have the same cultural capital or learning environment. A continued emphasis on Shakespeare mitigates against this.
- The SD, particularly in Units 3 and 4, feels too crowded. It is very difficult to have time to teach skills as thoroughly as one would like because of the amount of content.
- The SD is limited in that it fails to allow students to engage fully in Units 1 and 2 due to the prescription of texts. Teachers often base their text choice on what they know will engage their students based on their knowledge of the cohort, and engage in tasks that develop key skills that are necessary to achieve well in Units 3 and 4.
- The SD is limited as Units 1 and 2 are very different to Units 3 and 4, creating unnecessary complexity that serves little or no purpose for the extension or opportunities for success.
- The lack of an oral component mitigates against equity, as it is the area where some students excel.
- The SD does not address equity, but does it matter as, at the end of the day, all students are measured in the same standardised way.
- Limitations of how students are expected to show their learning impacts teachers' ability to differentiate when there is huge emphasis placed on preparing students for exams.
- The text list is too small with teachers finding students consistently disengaged from their study and purpose.

Respondents noted the following in relation to the Study Design's building on the knowledge and skills developed through the Victorian/Australian Curriculum:

- The SD can build on skills developed in the 7–10 curriculum but students are generally only given time to develop skills necessary for English as backward planning tends to consider only the requirements of the more popular subject.
- Theory is rarely discussed in Years 7–10 as it runs the danger of killing students' love of literature. Critical perspectives are generally taught in regard to media analysis.

Respondents stated that students chose Literature for the following reasons:

- They love good books, and intelligent and challenging authors.
- It allows them to explore different worlds and cultures through texts.
- They are attracted to a small, interested class, as well as the creative component.



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- They like the idea of being able to share their ideas with like-minded and often empathetic and open-minded students, though some students admit they do not like reading but like being in a class with like-minded friends.
- It provides a platform for student-centred discussion, whereas English is often viewed as a monologic transference of textual knowledge from teacher to student, often through PowerPoint presentations.

Respondents identified the following as impediments to students choosing Literature:

- It is too academic. Finding criticism, which are often university texts, that is accessible to students who love reading, but are not necessarily academic, is very hard.
- It is not marked up and many students are advised or decide to do English where they believe they will score better due to a larger number in the cohort.
- It is difficult to attain a 40+ score compared with English.
- A lack of engaged connection with the prescribed texts make students feel that it is for 'smart' students and elitist.
- Unlike English, where Units 1 and 2 mimic Units 3 and 4, thus allowing students to develop and strengthen their understanding of the skills and areas of study, Literature does not do this. Students, therefore, feel uneasy about understanding the skills and expectations from Year 11 to Year 12. They feel that English offers the opportunity to progress with confidence from Units 1 and 2 to Units 3 and 4, thus making the subject more achievable while Literature is seen as 'too hard' and 'too complex'.
- The examples of high achieving work, as published by the examiners, suggests students should be writing for a very narrow audience rather than building skills of expression that are transferable between subjects and, therefore, relevant to study beyond school.



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The Areas of Study

Respondents made the following comments in response to changes to:

Unit 1 Area of Study 2 : Exploration of genre

- The change offers opportunity to teachers to select a genre that will appeal to student's interests.
- It offers an opportunity to select a text that directly correlates to at least one text for Units 3 and 4 and to assist in preparing students for Year 12.
- There is a possibility that it will increase the number of texts taught in Unit 1 resulting in increased time demands on teaching the SD.
- 'Genre' feels reductive as a title. Address genre within the AoS but not necessarily as a title. I particularly liked the emphasis on 'the human experience' in the 'Ideas and concerns' unit.
- The unit is too prescriptive and, in so doing, runs the risk of losing student voice and originality.

Unit 2 Area of Study 1: Reading Nation

- It exposes students to voices and experiences that might be different to their own and are critical for reconciliation and understanding.
- It will provide some students with texts that reflect their own voice and experiences.
- It runs the risk of 'othering' through ignorance and developing an us/them language in classroom discussion, with teachers and students discussing First Nations Australia in reductive ways if they have no authentic understanding of, or connection to, First Nations Australians.
- It needs to provide a wider scope for students to explore First Nations Australians beyond simply those who are authors/creators.
- It addresses a change, not in skills which should be the focus, but rather the text authorship.
- It will be important to ensure that students of EAL background are not disadvantaged because of the struggle they might have with language issues, given the time allowed to teach the unit.

Unit 2 Area of Study 2: The text in context

- It improves consistency, as the former area of study was taught in wildly different ways, with some teachers merely doing adaptations.
- It is a sound decision, especially as some teachers did not distinguish between adaptations of texts and dialogic responses to texts.
- It raises questions as to how some teachers will ensure students are properly prepared for Unit 3 as 'Exploring connections to texts' was used as a precursor to teaching 'Adaptations and transformations'.
- It does not adequately prepare students for the requirements of Unit 3 where they must not only develop the ability to analyse film as text but also compare representations of the same text.



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Unit 3 Area of Study 1: Adaptations and transformations

- The additional assessment task allows for the more explicit practice of core and examinable skills.
- The task also allows for students to reinforce the skills of close analysis of both print and film texts, while maintaining their own developing skill set for their voice to come through in examining the language.
- Close analysis of a text formalises what most teachers are practising already, and adds academic weight to Unit 3 by establishing a connection between it and the exam.

Unit 3 Area of Study 2: Multiple viewpoints (formerly Literary perspectives)

- The creative task is a light/low stakes task to start the year. It is okay that it is not examinable but having an analytical component to it would have helped students into the text further.
- It may make the SAC more accessible as students will not be asked to work with two perspectives in the same response.
- Multiple viewpoints is better, being both clearer and more 'student friendly'.
- Students may still essentially want to mimic one or other SAC in Section A. There will need to be lots of samples/discussion/guidance to assist with this change.
- It will encourage students to develop unique interpretations of texts by modelling the idea that texts produce disparate opinions.
- It will eliminate confused understandings of 'literary theory' and 'literary perspectives'.
- Finding two authentic interpretations of texts that provide commentary on the same moment will prove difficult.
- The 'resistant reading' wording is too prescriptive. For some texts there are more viewpoints that endorse the text. In this instance it will feel like 'crowbarring' a resistant reading in. Perhaps this section should be weighted slightly less.
- It will lose students' interpretations and voices. The ambiguity and complexity of academic readings for and against, while interesting reading, should not be the critical lens of a student's exposition of a text.

Unit 4 Area of Study 1: Creative responses to text

- It seems unproductive to waste time on creative tasks so close to the exam. Unit 4 should be exam-oriented essentially
- Forty marks is too much for the creative component when teachers and students cannot teach/edit/give feedback
- It has always been a frustrating, artificial and constrained part of the course and still is.
- It will allow students to choose from any of their Year 12 texts as the basis for their Creative SAC.
- It will relieve some of the pressure that students have felt in Unit 4, as one task no longer has an explicit link to the examination.



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- It still encourages students to closely analyse the meaning and form of a text that they might use in the exam.
- VCAA has little idea of how little time to moderate oral presentations teachers have.
- As this is not on the examination it is best left to Unit 3, allowing students to continue to develop skills in this area that build towards the exam.



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The exam

Respondents made the following responses to the question of the suitability of the current external exam to effectively and equitably measure and standardise student achievement:

- The external exam is important and should be retained.
- The exam is not necessarily the most effective or equitable way of measuring student achievement. It does not align well with contemporary forms of differentiated teaching and does not properly touch on the literary perspectives.
- The external exam is one of the key barriers preventing students from choosing the subject, given the difficulty of performing highly with this form of assessment.

Respondents made the following suggestions regarding the modification or alternative to the exam:

- Students should be given more time in the exam than is currently given to be able to properly demonstrate their interpretation abilities.
- In order to give literary perspectives their due, Part A of the exam should be brought more in line with Area of Study 1 in Unit 4. The exam might, for example, provide additional prompts and call for something that is more like a text response.
- The exam should take its cue from the 'guided' approach of A Level Literature:
Part A: question on plays which includes a short excerpt for students to directly draw from
Part B: close analysis (poetry or prose)
Part C: conceptual comparison (drawing on 2 texts + poetry).
- Administer the exams internally, with mandated common texts and assessment tasks. However, this would add significantly to teacher workload and remove the relative teaching flexibility enjoyed in the current system.
- Introduce a folio-based task, undertaken by students over the course of several terms. This would allow for the development of student skill, deep engagement with an idea/text/context of their choosing, and flexibility in the presentation of their learning.



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Additional comments

The following general comments were made by respondents:

- The proposed SD is too prescriptive, restricting students in their ability to engage organically with texts, thereby losing independent voice. In so doing, the SD has become a reactive response to the political environment, rather than what the subject intends – student voice, original interpretation and engagement, and depth of experiences.
- The requirement to study four texts in Unit 1 and two texts in Unit 2 is totally impractical. Even if one of the genre texts is extracts, it is still a huge discrepancy.
- The intention of spreading skills across the units by incorporating a second task for each outcome makes Unit 3 very crowded. This is likely to place more workload pressures on teachers with regards to moderation sessions.
- There is little consistency between Units 1 and 2 and Units 3 and 4. Literature needs to be made more accessible by following the same scope and sequence model as VCE English by making Units 1 and 2 an opportunity for students to practise the skills and tasks of Units 3 and 4.
- With further emphasis placed on timed assessments to prepare students for exams, students begin to disengage from the subject as they are no longer able to refine their skills and work at a speed that is responsive to their needs and the complexity of the study. When asking the purpose of the oversaturation of timed SACs, the response is either to prepare students for an exam or to minimise instances of plagiarism. This disposes students to see the exam as the pinnacle of their study and to not engage with their class assessments with the same level of rigour. Student learning should be rewarded and valued at all stages of the unit study as not all students, particularly those with learning barriers, are able to best showcase their learning under high-stakes pressure of exams. Further to this, the scaling of the subject does not reflect its challenges and complexity, with many students choosing English instead as they think they will do better overall.